Personal Deep Dive

I. Islamic States and the Post-Classical World (1200–1450)

The Rise of Turkish Power: Seljuks and the Delhi Sultanate

The **Seljuk Empire** was a high medieval Turko-Persian Sunni Muslim state founded in 1037 by Turks originating from Central Asia. These Seljuks expanded first into mainland Persia before moving westward to conquer eastern Anatolia. A defining moment for the region was the **Battle of Manzikert in 1071**, where the Seljuks decisively defeated the Byzantine Empire, seizing most of Anatolia and providing a primary justification for the **First Crusade** (1095–1099). Between 1150 and 1250, the empire declined and was eventually overrun by Mongol invaders around 1260. Following the Mongol collapse, Anatolia was partitioned into **Emirates**—territories ruled by Arab noblemen or military personnel—until the Ottoman emirate eventually consolidated power over the others.

In the Indian subcontinent, the **Delhi Sultanate** (1206–1526 CE) emerged as a dominant Islamic empire after Turko-Iranian **Mamluks** (slave soldiers of the Arab caliphates) invaded and divided northern India. This Indo-Muslim kingdom is historically unique for successfully **repelling the Mongol invasions** from the Chagatai Khanate. This repulsion was critical, as it likely spared the subcontinent the mass death and cultural destruction experienced by the Persians, Chinese, and Eastern Europeans. Due to the military and economic stability provided by the Sultanate, the regional population grew by approximately 40% and economic production increased by over 20%.

The Sultanate was one of the first large, non-Arab Muslim states led by a **Sultan**, a ruler who exercised political authority and enforced Sharia law but lacked the religious authority of a Caliph to change theological doctrines. Domestically, the administration enforced Islamic policies that often conflicted with traditional Indian society, specifically through the destruction of **anthropomorphic art** (temples and sculptures of Hindu and Buddhist origin), which created lasting animosity among subjugated kingdoms. Despite this, the Sultanate served as a safe haven for Turkish and Persian refugees fleeing the Mongols, leading to a diverse ethnic and religious mixture that shaped modern Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

The Spread of Islam and the Golden Age

Islam also spread through **diasporic communities** formed by Muslim merchants who dominated Indian Ocean trade from the 8th to 16th centuries. These merchants settled in trade towns, leading to local conversions and the establishment of mosques in regions like Malaysia, Indonesia, and East Africa. In West Africa, Arab traders used camels to cross the Sahara after 1000 CE, establishing a firm presence in **Ghana** (600–1200) and **Mali** (1230–1670). **Mansa Musa**, the King of Mali, famously distributed massive amounts of gold during his pilgrimage to Mecca, sparking global interest in African wealth. While Muslims controlled education in cities like **Timbuktu**, which had over 150 schools, West African kings generally did not enforce Islamic law or Arab culture on their subjects.

The **Abbasid period** is recognized as the **Golden Age of Islamic culture**. At the **House of Wisdom** in Baghdad (destroyed by Mongols in 1258), scholars preserved and combined Greco-Roman and Indian ideas. Mathematicians used Indian numeric symbols to develop algebra, and **Nasir al-Din al-Tusi** created trigonometry. In medicine, they correctly diagnosed measles and smallpox and established the first hospitals and traveling clinics. Female writers also thrived; **A'ishah al-Ba'uniyyah**, a Sufi master, was the most prolific Arabic woman writer before 1900.

II. Post-Classical China (581–1279)

Reunification and Innovation

The **Sui Dynasty** (581–618 CE) reunited the Han peoples for the first time since the Han fall, establishing a centralized state and the **Confucian examination system** to fill bureaucratic roles by merit. They also constructed the **Grand Canal**, linking northern and central China. The **Tang Dynasty** (618–907 CE) succeeded them, ushering in a high point of territorial growth through conquest and diplomacy, reaching further than the Han. The introduction of **Champa rice** from Vietnam during this era led to a massive population surge.

Philosophically, the Tang developed **Neo-Confucianism**, which sought to remove "tainted" spiritual elements of Taoism and Buddhism. This led to the persecution of Buddhism under **Emperor Wuzong** (840–846), who destroyed temples and relics to "cleanse" China and seize wealth for military funds. The **Song Dynasty** (960–1279) continued this golden age through maritime ventures, establishing the first **standing navy** and

issuing the first **state paper money**. They also pioneered the use of **gunpowder** and the **true north compass**. Their early industrial revolution in steel and iron made Chinese trade highly desirable, leading to a **tribute system** where neighboring states (Korea, Japan, SE Asia) had to pay for trade rights. However, the Song are also remembered for the growth of **foot binding**, where upper-class women's feet were broken and squeezed into "lotus shoes". The dynasty eventually fell to the Mongol-led **Yuan Dynasty** in 1279.

III. Feudalism, Mongols, and Global Trade

Feudal Systems in Europe and Japan

Following the fall of Rome, Europe adopted the **manorial system** (feudalism), a decentralized structure based on **fealty** (loyalty). Lords provided protection to **serfs** (unfree laborers) who worked **Common Land** in exchange for rent paid in labor or grain. European states were strictly bound to the **Catholic Church**, where any religious dissent or scientific interpretation contradicting the Church was a capital offense.

In Japan, the 7th-century **Taika Reforms** failed to establish a strong centralized government, leading to a feudal system by the 13th century. This hierarchy featured a **Shogun** (military leader), **Daimyo** (land-owning nobles), and **Samurai** (warriors). A notable difference from Europe was that Japanese peasants were considered more honorable than merchants, who were seen as profiting from the labor of others.

The Mongol Empire and Global Impact

Unified by **Genghis Khan** in 1206, the **Mongol Empire** became the largest land empire in history, utilizing horseback archers and captured Chinese and Persian siege workers. After **Kublai Khan** died in 1294, the empire split into four **Khanates**: the Golden Horde, Chagatai, Ilkhanate, and Yuan Dynasty. While brutal in conquest—killing an estimated 30 million people—Mongol rule facilitated the **Pax Mongolica**, allowing for the spread of gunpowder, the compass, and paper along the Silk Road. However, this connectivity also spread the **Black Death**, which killed 75–200 million people worldwide.

IV. Pre-Columbian Americas and Other Empires

American Civilizations

The **Maya** were a collection of city-states in the Yucatan known for step pyramids, advanced mathematics, and a sophisticated writing system. The **Aztec Empire** was a military confederacy centered in **Tenochtitlan** that used **chinampas** (island farms) and focused on collecting tribute rather than local administration. The **Inca Empire** in the Andes developed a centralized state with a vast road network and used **quipus** (knotted strings) for record-keeping. Most uniquely, they organized labor through the **Mit'a system**, a mandatory state work program for public projects.

Other Major States

- **Great Zimbabwe:** A trading center for gold and ivory linked as far as China; abandoned c. 1450 due to resource exhaustion or climate change.
- **Ethiopia:** A Christian kingdom governed by the **Solomonic dynasty** that maintained contact with Europe and received Portuguese aid to defeat the Adal Sultanate.
- **Khmer Empire:** A Hindu-Buddhist empire in Southeast Asia that built **Angkor**, the largest pre-industrial urban center in history.
- **Majapahit:** A maritime Indonesian empire that successfully repelled Mongol invasions multiple times.

V. The Early Modern Era (1450–1750)

European Exploration and the Renaissance

The **Renaissance** was a "rebirth" of knowledge in Europe fueled by Greco-Roman works rediscovered through the Crusades and new ideas from the Islamic and Mongol worlds. The **printing press** allowed this information to spread rapidly. Motivated by **God, Gold, and Glory**, Europeans used technologies like the **caravel**, **astrolabe**, and **portolan maps** to explore. **Joint-stock companies** were formed to share the high costs and risks of these voyages.

Portugal established a **trade-post empire** in the Indian Ocean, forcing merchants to buy a **cartaz** (permit). Spain focused on a conquest-based empire in the Americas, leading to the **Treaty of Tordesillas**, which split the New World between the two powers. The **Columbian Exchange**

globalized crops like potatoes and maize while introducing horses to the Americas. Crucially, Afro-Eurasian diseases like **smallpox** killed nearly 90% of Native Americans.

Silver, Mercantilism, and Social Classes

The Spanish discovered massive silver deposits in the Americas and used a severe version of the **Mit'a system** to mine it. This silver caused inflation in Spain and led to an economic crisis in **Ming China**, which had adopted a "silver-only" tax policy. European states practiced **Mercantilism**, believing wealth was fixed and aiming to maximize exports while stealing or interrupting rival trade.

In the Spanish colonies, a racial caste system developed: **Peninsulares** (born in Europe), **Creoles** (Europeans born in the Americas), **Mestizos**, **Mulattos**, and **Zambos**. Meanwhile, in Japan, the **Tokugawa Shogunate** unified the country and initiated **Sakoku**, a policy of near-total isolation from the outside world.

The Gunpowder Empires

- **Ottomans:** Captured **Constantinople in 1453**; used the **devshirme** (blood tax) to create the **Janissary** elite military force.
- **Safavids:** A native Persian empire that established **Shi'a Islam** as its state religion, leading to 200 years of conflict with the Sunni Ottomans.
- **Mughals:** Turco-Mongol rulers of India who were religiously tolerant; **Akbar the Great** used **zamindars** (local governors) for tax collection.

Religious and Scientific Revolutions

In 1517, **Martin Luther** sparked the **Protestant Reformation** with his **95 Theses**, challenging Catholic corruption; his ideas spread rapidly via the printing press. Simultaneously, the **Scientific Revolution** shifted the focus to evidence-based math and observation, with thinkers like **Copernicus** and **Newton** proving laws of motion and a heliocentric solar system. Religions also blended, seen in **Vodun** (West African + Christianity) and **Sufism** (mystical Islam). Finally, the **Little Ice Age** (1300–1850) lowered global temperatures, temporarily slowing population growth and agricultural output.